

"To fight and be killed is sometimes the best service a brave man can render," was the meaning rejoinder.

"Ay," said Colkitto, a sudden peculiar light in his black eyes. "Then it surprises me to find the valorous Mr. Will Murray still to the fore. Gentlemen," he went on, turning with a sweep to the seniors, "this is not just the kind of civility I maybe expected, coming on the king's business. But have it your own way. If any gentleman here present thinks my hand has been slack in striking I am ready to receive proof of his better mettle."

"That is soon given," returned Murray, his hand on the basket hilt of his sword.

Colkitto cast him a contemptuous look. "I needn't have come so far to fight with a boy," was the response.

"Try the boy," retorted Murray fiercely.

"Tush, tush, gentlemen," said Struan, stepping between them. "Is this a time for private quarrels? Bethink you that every minute is more precious than gold."

"Truly," replied Colkitto, with unruffled coolness, "we have but to prolong these present courtesies a short while to be heartened by the squeal of the Campbell pipes. It sticks in my mind that Gillespie Gruamach and his people have a particular fondness for this fat land of Athole. Did I not hear they were with you in the spring season, doing as they pleased wherever there was a cow to lift, a wall to pull down, a stack to fire, or a weapon to seize?